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Seventy-first year

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Tuesday, 13 December 2016, 12.15 p.m.

New York

President:	Mr. Oyarzun Marchesi	(Spain)
Members:	Angola	Mr. Martins
	China	Mr. Wu Haitao
	Egypt	Mr. Aboulatta
	France	Mr. Delattre
	Japan	Mr. Bessho
	Malaysia	Mrs. Adnin
	New Zealand	Mr. Van Bohemen
	Russian Federation	Mr. Churkin
	Senegal	Mr. Ciss
	Ukraine	Mr. Yelchenko
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Rycroft
	United States of America	Ms. Power
	Uruguay	Mr. Bermúdez
	Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)	Mr. Suárez Moreno

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

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The meeting was called to order at 12.15 p.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic to participate in this meeting.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I wish to warmly welcome the Secretary-General, His Excellency Mr. Ban Ki-moon, to whom I now give him floor.

The Secretary-General: I have been invited to address the Security Council on the tragic situation in Aleppo. Since late November, we have seen Syrian Government forces and their allies capture large swathes of territory in eastern Aleppo. In the past 48 hours, we have seen an almost complete collapse of the armed opposition's front lines, leaving them with only 5 per cent of their original territory in the city.

That came about after levels of bombardment that many witnesses describe as unprecedented. Civilian deaths and injuries continue at a brutal pace as the United Nations receives credible reports of scores of civilians being killed either by intense bombardment or summary executions by pro-Government forces. We have seen shocking videos of a body burning in the street, ostensibly after aerial bombardment. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has received reports of civilians, including women and children, in four neighbourhoods being rounded up and executed.

As front lines have shifted, civilians have fled across dangerous routes, taking almost no belongings with them. Many families have lost contact with their families inside of eastern Aleppo, after they were displaced or after they burned their SIM cards and devices for fear of facing repercussions if detained. There have been allegations of young men being rounded up and detained, or sent to fight for Government forces. Tens of thousands have already been recorded flooding into western Aleppo, but it is likely that many more thousands who are not recorded or registered have been displaced; but we have no accurate data.

Nor do we have accurate data about the number that remain in the opposition-controlled pocket of eastern Aleppo, because all of the health and governance entities capable of counting the living and the dead have effectively dissolved into the chaos. Moreover, the Syrian authorities have systematically denied us a presence on the ground to directly verify reports. However, that does not mean that the reports that we are receiving are not credible — we are confident that civilians number in the thousands.

Meanwhile, yesterda the Russian Defence Ministry reported that it had helped more than 100,000 civilians leave eastern Aleppo neighbourhoods, including 40,484 children, and that it had supplied 78 tons of humanitarian assistance to internally displaced persons. It also reported that 2,215 militants had lain down weapons and left eastern Aleppo, and that the Russian military was continuing to demine eastern Aleppo neighbourhoods and had completed the demining of more than 31 hectares of urban structures, as well as 18 kilometres of roads.

The Russian Defence Ministry has also stated that no opposition, humanitarian organizations or human rights defenders are present in Aleppo and that eastern Aleppo had been under the full control of terrorists. It has also suggested that the estimate of 250,000 besieged civilians was overstated and has emphasized that terrorists held over 100,000 civilians as human shields in eastern Aleppo and left as soon as presented with the opportunity to do so. The Russian Federation's Reconciliation Centre has also reportedly registered allegations of torture and execution, as described by residents fleeing eastern Aleppo.

We understand that there are ongoing negotiations between the parties for an evacuation deal, facilitated by Russia and Turkey. We support those efforts and stand ready to help implement and oversee such an agreement, which we understand may now be imminent. We remind all parties of their obligations under international humanitarian law to prioritize the safe passage of civilians out of eastern Aleppo and to ensure that those who have surrendered or have been captured are treated humanely and in line with international law.

The Security Council and Member States have repeatedly emphasized the importance of early warning and prevention as critical to addressing the challenges of international peace and security. There was an abundance of early warning given to

the Council regarding the situation in Aleppo. Most notably, my Special Envoy repeatedly warned over the past several months that eastern Aleppo could be destroyed by the end of the year if urgent action were not taken. He proposed concrete measures to address concerns regarding the Al-Nusra Front without risking unnecessary loss of life or destruction of parts of one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world.

In addition, the General Assembly has overwhelmingly voted to urge preventive action by the Council on Aleppo. But when presented with opportunities to do so over the past three months, the Council failed to do it. Since September, the Security Council has failed to adopt three draft resolutions that could have enabled a humanitarian truce, the evacuation of civilians and the entry of lifesaving aid.

I have said before that we have collectively failed the people of Syria. The Security Council has not exercised its pre-eminent responsibility with regard to the maintenance of international peace and security. History will not easily absolve us, but that failure compels us to do even more to offer the people of Aleppo our solidarity at this moment.

The immediate task is to do all we can to stop the carnage. As the battle for Aleppo concludes, I call on the Syrian authorities and their allies, Russia and Iran, to honour their obligations under international humanitarian law to do the following: urgently allow the remaining civilians to escape the area, and facilitate access for all humanitarian actors and the delivery of critically important assistance. The laws of war and universal human rights must be respected.

In recent days and hours, we appear to be witnessing nothing less an all-out effort by the Syrian Government and its allies to end the country's internal conflict through a total, uncompromising military victory. I do not accept recent statements by the Syrian Government and the Russian Ministry of Defence that there were no opposition groups or humanitarian organizations present in eastern Aleppo.

That does not mean that I discount the importance of fighting terrorism or the need to combat the confirmed presence of the listed terrorist group the Al-Nusra Front in eastern Aleppo. In fact, I support and agree with that, but, as my Special Envoy has argued, should the presence of fewer than a 1,000 fighters determine the fate of tens, and possibly hundreds of thousands, of civilians? Context also matters. No one disputes that Al-Nusra Front fighters are indeed present in Aleppo. But they are also present in larger numbers and concentrations elsewhere in Syria. The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is not known to be present in Aleppo, but it appears to have exploited the focus on Aleppo by the Syrian Government and its allies to go on the offensive in Palmyra.

The Syrian conflict will not end as a result of what happens on the battlefield in the next days and weeks. Military advances will not solve the refugee crisis, nor will the defeat of ISIL and its poisonous ideology be complete when Mosul and Raqqa are ultimately liberated. That is wishful thinking.

Just this week, Colombian President and Nobel Peace Laureate Juan Manuel Santos warned us that a final victory through force, when non-violent alternatives exist, is nothing other than the defeat of humankind itself. In Syria the consequences of such a de-humanizing approach could be to further accelerate radicalization leading to the next iteration of Al-Qaida and ISIL. It would also send a frightening signal to the millions who have already fled the violence, rendering the Syrian refugee population semi-permanent and placing further pressure on the region and on Europe.

The Council has repeatedly affirmed that an inclusive and Syrian-led political process that addresses the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people is the only way to find a sustainable solution to this wretched conflict. It is past time for the Council to act — and to force others to act — on that prescription. Aleppo should represent the end of the quest for military victory, not the start of a broader military campaign in a country already ravaged beyond all recognition by five years of war. The current battle needs to be followed by an immediate end to violence by all sides and unfettered humanitarian access through genuine engagement without preconditions, around the political tools we already possess, including resolution 2254 (2015).

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): I thank the Secretary-General for his briefing.

I shall now give the floor to the members of the Security Council.

Mr. Delattre (France) (*spoke in French*): I thank the Spanish presidency for agreeing to convene today's urgent meeting at the request of France and the United Kingdom. I also thank the Secretary-General for his briefing and his commitment.

As we speak, the worst-case scenario is occurring in Aleppo. The massacre of civilians is taking place under the eyes of the international community. According to the information we have, summary executions have been carried out in the streets of eastern Aleppo. Civilians are being murdered, and at times burnt alive in their homes. The dead bodies of civilians and children litter the streets of Aleppo.

The worst is that that abomination was predictable, as we have said here. We are all familiar with the barbaric methods of the Bashar Al-Assad regime. We are perfectly aware of the disregard he has shown for the lives of civilians since the beginning of the Syrian conflict. We all know very well of what could happen in the next few hours to some 120,000 people who are still trapped in eastern Aleppo, and who, if we do nothing, could be subjected to the brutality of the Al-Assad forces.

An immediate end to the massacre is absolutely critical in order to allow the evacuation under international protection of all civilians towards the destination of their choice and to authorize the immediate and unimpeded access of humanitarian assistance. That is the message that France and its partners conveyed during the meeting that the French Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Jean-Marc Ayrault, held in Paris on 10 December. It is the message that the General Assembly conveyed to the world through resolution 71/130, adopted by an overwhelming majority a few days ago. Once again, France forcefully calls upon those who have the capacity to act, particularly Russia, to put an immediate end to the bloodshed and respond to the humanitarian emergency, which is, once again, an absolute emergency.

Let us make no mistake: the tragedy of Aleppo is not the painful path that we must go down to finally achieve the stabilization of Syria — a so-called expedient and rebuilt Syria. No, at the end of this plunge into the abyss, of these children maimed by bombs, disfigured by hunger, there is the promise of an endless conflict from which terrorist groups will be the primary beneficiaries. The tragedy of Aleppo — we must repeat this and hammer it home — mechanically fuels radicalization, and therefore terrorism. It is a gift to the terrorists. Therefore, the comparison of Aleppo today and Guernica during the Spanish civil war appears more relevant than ever. Aleppo is both the epicentre of the worst humanitarian tragedy of the early twenty-first century and a black hole that sucks up and destroys all the values of the United Nations. Moreover, it carries the promise of terrible tragedies to follow.

Finally, allow me to stress that the tragedy of Aleppo did not happen by accident. We will need to dismantle the processes that have made possible this plunge into the abyss. This tragedy is the result of the savagery of some people, of the active complicity and complete cynicism of others, but also of a great deal of cowardice and indifference and — we need to have the courage to say it — of the powerlessness of the international community and the United Nations. In order to avoid this collective powerlessness that we find ourselves in, which seriously calls into question the very credibility of the Security Council, France has proposed, together with Mexico, an initiative allowing for the suspension of the resort to the veto by permanent member States in cases of mass atrocities. That initiative, which France will continue to promote, has already received the support of approximately 100 countries.

I do not want to go on too long, but in these terrible times for Aleppo — a city that has seen so many brilliant civilizations and that is now delivered up to barbarity — France again calls for action and therefore for the necessary uniting around the common goals founded on the minimum principle of humanity, which the Secretary-General has just recalled. Tens of thousands of lives are at stake. They have just one glimmer of hope, and they depend on us. Let us therefore act.

Mr. Rycroft (United Kingdom): I thank you, Mr. President, for agreeing to hold this emergency meeting at the initiative of France and the United Kingdom.

This is a dark day for the people of Aleppo, surely the darkest of the past five years. Al-Assad's forces, propped up by Russia and Iran, have once again redefined horror. They have gone from siege to slaughter.

Today the United Nations has received reports that pro-Government forces have been entering homes in eastern Aleppo. They have been going door to door executing people on the spot. Eighty-two people have been murdered, 13 of whom are women and 11 children. None were terrorists. We have heard reports of women committing suicide in order not to be raped. We have heard reports of people being burned alive. We have heard reports that hundreds of men have disappeared while fleeing Aleppo, taken by the regime.

All those reports evoke the darkest days of the history of the United Nations. When it happened before, we said "never again". Well, it is happening again, today.

There must be protection for civilians. Even wars have rules. We urge the Al-Assad regime and Russia and Iran to respect those rules, and indeed to respect the will of the vast majority of Security Council members and the vast majority of members of the General Assembly. We urge those who chose to back Al-Assad to think again.

As the Secretary-General has just told us, the Security Council has failed. It has failed because Russia has used and abused its veto time and again, even to prevent a seven-day ceasefire. To those who backed Al-Assad and blocked action in the Council we ask: How can you side with such cruelty? How can you abide such an abuse of the Charter of the United Nations, words that we all claim to uphold? Therefore, re-find your moral compass, re-find your believe in the dignity and worth of the human person. Re-find these things before it is too late, and help us bring an end to the suffering.

We know what needs to happen. The attacks, the killings must stop. The suffering of those left in Aleppo has gone on for far too long. The United Nations stands ready to help get aid in and get civilians out. The opposition has agreed to the plan. But in order for it to happen, the regime and its backers must put humanity first and grant the United Nations the permission needed.

We will have different arguments from Russia this morning, but I sincerely hope that, despite the differences, Russia and others on the Security Council who opposed the ceasefire last week could at least agree to these basic steps: first, to allow the United Nations to access eastern Aleppo so that it can provide eyes on the ground, get aid in to those who need it and protect civilians; secondly, join my call today that we will hold accountable anyone from any side who commits war crimes; and, thirdly, help bring peace to Syria through the only route possible, that is, a political solution.

With the eyes of the world watching, we should be clear what will happen if this does not come to pass. Aleppo will become a memory — a city only known to the dead. In the coming days, hundreds, if not thousands, of people will be killed or disappeared, their fates unknown. But the fall of Aleppo will not be a victory for Al-Assad. He will have sacrificed his country and the lives of hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians just to keep his grip on power. How can he expect to lead a country that he has so callously destroyed? How can he expect to unite a country that he himself has wilfully divided?

A doctor from Aleppo illustrated this best earlier this month. He said,

> "Assad gave people in Aleppo only two choices: either to go back to his control or to die by bombing. We will not go back again to Assad's control."

The war will not end with the fall of Aleppo. Al-Assad will never control the hearts or minds of those crying out for freedom. He will only hold a third of Syria, and he will be in debt to those foreign Powers that would rather help him destroy his country than help the Council save it.

The irony is that, as the as they carry out these barbaric attacks in the name of defeating terrorism, it is the real terrorists, the real threat, who are resurging elsewhere in Syria. This week Palmyra fell again to Da'esh. Palmyra is now in the hands of a group whose bloodlust is rivaled onlyby that of the Al-Assad regime. Instead of fighting them, Al-Assad has enabled them. He has enabled them through obsessively, systematically brutalizing his own people. He claims that he is fighting terrorism. If it were not so tragic, so horrific, those claims would be laughable.

The Council cannot turn a blind eye on this gravest day of this most heinous conflict of the twenty-first century. We cannot be distracted by false claims of fighting terrorism. And we cannot, we must not, allow there to be impunity for these war crimes. We owe it to the people of Aleppo, the living and the dead, to ensure that there is accountability for the horror perpetrated by Al-Assad and his Russian and Iranian backers.

Ms. Power (United States of America): Here is what is happening right now in eastern Aleppo. Syrians trapped by the fighting are sending out their final appeals for help, or they are saying their goodbyes. A doctor named Mohammad Abu Rajab left a voice message:

> "This is a final distress call to the world. Save the lives of these children, women and old men. Save them. Nobody is left. You might not hear our voice after this."

A photographer named Amin Al-Halabi wrote on Facebook,

> "I am waiting to die or be captured by the Al-Assad regime. Pray for me and always remember us."

A teacher named Abdel Kafi Alhamdo said,

> "I can tweet now, but I might not do it forever. Please save my daughter's life and others. This is a call from a father."

Another doctor told a journalist,

> "Remember that there was a city called Aleppo that the world erased from the map and history."

This is what is happening in eastern Aleppo. This is what is being done by States Members of the United Nations that are sitting around this horseshoe table today. This is what is being done to the people of eastern Aleppo — to fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, brothers and sisters, like each of us here.

It is extremely hard to get information, of course, out of the small area still held by the opposition. We will hear that as an alibi and a way of papering over what video testimony, phone calls and others are bringing us live. We will hear it invoked, that it is hard to verify.

It is deliberate. The Al-Assad regime and Russia, backed by Iran, using militias on the ground, have done everything that they can to cut off the city. The Security Council will hear "Well, we do not really know. Maybe it is made up." But they are hiding what is happening from the world. It would be easy for independent investigators to get in, along with food, health workers and others. Instead, the perpetrators are hiding their brutal assault from the world wilfully. But consider the many accounts that have made it out, so many of them — those of first responders describing children's voices from beneath the rubble of collapsed buildings. There are no first responders or equipment left to dig them out, and no doctors left to treat them. Bodies lie in the streets of eastern Aleppo, but nobody dares collect them for fear of getting bombed or shot to death in the process. As many as a 100 children are reportedly trapped right now in a building under heavy fire. Clearly, those young children must be terrorists, because all those who are being executed, everybody being barrel-bombed, everybody who has been attacked with chlorine gas — Council members will be told they are all terrorists, every last one, even the infants.

The regime of Bashar Al-Assad, Russia, Iran and their affiliated militias are the ones responsible for what the United Nations calls a complete meltdown of humanity. And they are showing no mercy, even now, despite their territorial conquests. Just in the past 24 hours, pro-Al-Assad forces reportedly killed at least 82 civilians, including 11 women and 13 children. Those forces are reportedly entering homes and executing civilians on the spot, as we have heard. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, foreign militias, such as the Iraqi Harakat Al-Nujaba organization, are involved in those killings. Where civilians are able to run the gauntlet and make it across the front lines, Syrian intelligence agencies are pulling people aside and sending them away, perhaps to be gang-pressed to the front lines - or likely to the same prisons in which we know the Al-Assad regime tortures and executes those in its custody.

In the light of these reports, we join others — and especially the Secretary-General in one of his final appeals, in reiterating our call to the Al-Assad regime and Russia to stop their assaults on Aleppo — to protect civilians. We call on Russia and Al-Assad to allow impartial international observers into the city to oversee the safe evacuation of the people who wish to leave but justifiably fear that if they try, they will be shot in the street or carted off to one of Al-Assad's gulags.

The Al-Assad regime and Russia appear dead set on seizing every last square inch of Aleppo by force no matter how many innocent bodies pile up in their wake. But we keep insisting on answering the United Nations call for access and safe and orderly evacuation, because we are not willing to accept that innocent men, women and children can be butchered simply because they happen to live in a conflict area. Our shared humanity and security demand that certain rules of war — the most basic — hold. It is up to each and every one of us here to defend those rules.

To the Al-Assad regime, Russia and Iran, three Member States behind the conquest of and carnage in Aleppo, I say that they bear responsibility for these atrocities. By rejecting the evacuation efforts of the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross they are signalling to those militias that are massacring innocents to continue doing what they are doing. Denying or obfuscating the facts, as they will do today, by saying that up is down and black is white will not absolve them.

When one day there is a full accounting of the horrors committed in this assault of Aleppo — and that day will come sooner or later — those countries will not be able to say that they did not know what was happening and were not involved. We will all know what was happening, and we will all know that they were involved.

Aleppo will join the ranks of those events in world history that define modern evil and stain or conscious decades later: Halabja, Rwanda, Srebrenica and now Aleppo. To the Al-Assad regime, Russia and Iran, I say to them that their forces and proxies are carrying out these crimes. Their barrel bombs, mortars and air strikes have allowed the militias in Aleppo to encircle tens of thousands of civilians in their ever-tightening noose. It is their noose — three States Members of the United Nations contributing to a noose around civilians. It should shame them. Instead, by all appearances, it is emboldening them; they are plotting their next assault. Are they truly incapable of shame? Is there literally nothing that can shame them? Is there no act of barbarism against civilians, no execution of a child that gets under their skin or just creeps them out a little bit? Is there nothing that they will not lie about or justify?

To the members of the Council and all States Members of the United Nations, I say that the ghastly attacks that we are witnessing in Aleppo will not stop if the city falls. The regime and its Russian allies will only be emboldened to replicate their starve-and-surrender-and-slaughter tactics elsewhere. This will be their model for attempting to retake cities and towns across Syria. It will not end with Aleppo, and it will not focus on terrorists. It never has, and there is no evidence that it will.

No matter how small a country, no matter its view of sovereignty, if it shares our view that terrorism is one of the singular causes on Earth that is worth fighting, it is essential that each of us shoulder our responsibility to denounce these atrocities. We have just heard the Secretary-General state it plainly. We have to tell those responsible that they must stop. This is not the time for more equivocation, for self-censoring, to avoid naming names, for diplomatic niceties of the kind that are so well-practiced here in the Council.

Say who is responsible. Appeal to Moscow, to Damascus, to Tehran that they have to stop. Use every public and private channel available and bank shot off someone who knows someone. The lives of tens of thousands of Syrians still in eastern Aleppo — between 30,000 and 60,000 people — and hundreds of thousands more across the country who are besieged depend on it.

Mr. Churkin (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): My statement will be made up of four small parts.

The first is that propaganda, disinformation and psychological warfare are not new concepts. A new phenomenon, exacerbated by what we are seeing in the Syrian conflict, is the spread of fake news. In such fabrications, they stoop to using images of children. We do not want the Secretariat of the United Nations to be used as an instrument in such a cynical game.

I do not want to remind the Western troika that summoned today's meeting, which has spoken so grandiloquently of the role that they played in the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) as a result of the American and British invasion of Iraq, of the role that those three countries played in exacerbating the Syrian crisis, which has led to such dreadful consequences and the resurgence of terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq. What I find particularly strange was the statement by the representative of the United States, who delivered her statement as if she were Mother Teresa. She should remember what country she is representing and her own country's track record. Only then can she start opining from the position of moral supremacy. Let us ask: Who is guilty for what? Who is to blame? I think that ultimately God will tell us.

The second part of my statement concerns information. As of yesterday evening, Syrian authorities had assumed full control of over 98 per cent of Aleppo. The militant rebels hold only three square kilometres. In the past 24 hours, the Syrian army has freed another 11 neighbourhoods in eastern Aleppo. In the past 24 hours, the regions of Aleppo that are still under rebel control have decreased. With the help of the Russian Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in the Syrian Arab Republic, 7,796 civilians have been evacuated, including 3,946 children. Some 375 rebels have laid down their arms and crossed into the western opart of the city. Since the start of the operation, approximately 110,000 civilians — including 44,367 children — have been evacuated from the city, and more than 7,000 have returned to their homes in the liberated areas of the western part of Aleppo.

Three humanitarian actions have taken place in the past 24 hours, during which civilians in temporary shelters in eastern Aleppo have received humanitarian supplies. In the neighbourhoods of Al-Aziza and Sheikh Maqsood, around one ton of supplies has been delivered. In Al-Malihah, around 1.5 tons of supplies have gotten through. For civilians leaving areas of Aleppo under the control of illegal armed groups, hot food and emergency supplies are being provided.

In the past 24 hours, a total of 16 hectares have been demined and 48 buildings — including five schools, a residential complex and a home for the elderly — as well as a park and 2.5 kilometres of roads, have been cleansed of improvised explosive devices. In the past 24 hours, Russian sappers have deactivated and disassembled 1,200 explosive devices in the liberated parts of eastern Aleppo. Results of a survey of the liberated areas of eastern Aleppo conducted by Russian sappers of the International Mine Action Centre have not yet revealed any hospital or school that the militants used for its intended purpose. There are still numerous armed mines in public buildings and schools that were used by the rebels as storage centres for explosives or headquarters for sharia courts or meeting places for militants or factories for making homemade rockets.

I will move on to the third part of my statement, using the latest information. Currently, the Syrian army is concluding the liberation of Aleppo from radical militant groups, including terrorists of the Al-Nusra Front, who earlier refused to leave the city through the secure routes. Moreover, not only did they continue with their hostilities against Government forces, stating that it was better to die than surrender, but they also regulary shelled civilians neighbourhoods in Aleppo, killing innocent women, children and elderly people. More than that, they hampered any chance of civilians leaving areas of militant control. They opened fire on civilians who were trying to break out towards the western part of the city. That fact has been confirmed by numerous witness testimonies, including from personnel of international humanitarian agencies.

With respect to mass arrests and disappearances and bloody repraisals against civilian activists, we have no information attesting to that. An hour ago, we contacted our Embassy in Demascus, which is contact with the Syrian authorities and the Commander of the Russian Army in Syria. They categorically denied that information. Naturally, the militants leaving the encircled city were checked for possible involvement in the commission of crimes, including attacks on a Russian field hospital. We believe that in this situation, the measures taken have been justified, because we are dealing with terrorist thugs from Al-Nusra, Nour al-Din al-Zenki thugs and other such gangs.

However, I want to stress in particular that the vast majority of former members of the illegal armed groups that have handed themselves over to Syrian authorities as a result of amnesty have returned to their families, after concluding with the proper procedures. The most important aspect of the conflict, the counter-terrorist operation in Aleppo, will conclude in the next few hours. All militants, together with members of their families and the injured, are currently going through agreed corridors towards destinations that they have voluntarily chosen, including towards Idlib. At checkpoints, officers from the Russian Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides are working.

As to arbitrary arrests or other violations of the agreement reached with the illegal armed groups, the Russian military has not reported any such violations. Moreover, such information can be confirmed by representatives of International Committee of the Red Cross currently in Aleppo, as well as by all United Nations humanitarian agencies based in Aleppo, headed by the Resident Coordinator.

Finally, we are responding to all communiqués sent to us, including from the United States delegation, with regard to alleged reports of certain abuses or violations of international humanitarian law. I will read out the text of a response of our military representative in Geneva to a message he received from Jan Egeland, who is, as the Council knows, Steffan de Mistura's Senior Special Adviser on Humanitarian Affairs. The response reads as follows:

> "Having received a signal that in eastern Aleppo cases of ill treatment by Government forces against civilians, the Russian Reconciliation Centre has begun an immediate investigation into such accusations".

Yesterday and today, Russian officers visited all liberated regions. They spoke with commanders and civilians. Not a single report of ill treatment or violations of international humanitarian law against civilians of eastern Aleppo was discovered. The endless incidents listed just now are not credible. At the same time, facts have come to light concerning crimes committed by terrorists. In the Al-Rashidin neighbourhood were found

the bodies of people who had been executed trying to leave the city. In the area of Al-Ansari Mashad, booby-trapped schools and hospitals were discovered. In the Insari Sark neighbourhood, the documents of a sharia court were discovered, containing death sentences delivered against civilians. All opposition headquarters and armaments have been located in schools, mosques and hospitals. Thousands of witness testimonies have been collected, describing the torture, summary execution and brutalization of civilians by insurgents. We hope that our interlocutors will have the courage and objectivity to report on that.

We hope that the Secretariat has the courage and objectivity to state and report all of this and to not try to one-sidedly blame the Syrian Government and, as has been said here, those who support them, including Russia. Those who say that are protecting the terrorists. For a long time, we have said that it was unacceptable when Secretariat officials have spoken about terrorists as being no more than a detail of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. They are not just a detail. They are a primary fact, which is so interpreted in Security Council resolutions.

As for the Security Council not fulfilling its role, I beg to disagree. The Council adopted the fundamental resolution 2254 (2015) in December last year. It is not our fault that certain States continue to seek satisfaction on the battlefield while maintaining the illusion of the possible change of regimes in Damascus by force. Let us return to proper work and properly implementing Security Council resolutions that might actually lead to a settlement of the crisis in Syria.

Mr. Van Bohemen (New Zealand): Twenty-three years ago, I sat behind my Ambassador as the Security Council discussed Rwanda. It was the most horrible experience. As I prepared to come here on my posting this time, I was often asked by my colleagues: What will be your Rwanda moment? I think it has probably arrived. Then, as now, there were credible reports coming in of atrocities being committed. Then, as now, there was someone at the table, a party to the conflict, that had their own view. But in the end the truth came through.

I choose to believe the Secretary-General when he comes to the Council and tells us there are credible reports of atrocities being committed. I choose to believe the Secretary-General and the people working for him when they say the issue is not terrorism, but it is barbarism.

This was a scenario we had desperately hoped to avoid when we worked with Egypt and Spain to try to adopt a Council draft resolution to stop the violence and provide orderly access for the United Nations and other humanitarian partners to support the needs of the beleaguered city. We made the same plea in consultations last week when we sort of came to some rough agreement about what we might say to the media, except that the one important point we asked for — that the United Nations must be involved in the access and in the evacuation arrangements — was not allowed to us by Russia. That is the problem we have today. The United Nations is not on the ground. The United Nations is not able to verify. So it is no good coming back and telling us that you have done all of these reports and investigations, because no one is there to check on you.

The tactics being used in eastern Aleppo go against basic humanity. Such short-term tactics do nothing to counter terrorism. They fuel radicalization and, rather than hastening the end of the war, they make peace more distant.

We share the criticisms of the Secretary-General of the Council's failure to act. We have called attention to those failures repeatedly over the past months. We have tried to remedy that failure by putting forward draft resolutions to address the issue. And we have failed. We have failed. In one sense it is a collective failure of the entire Council. But in another sense, it is a specific failure because a permanent member has used a veto to prevent Council action to address a serious humanitarian crisis. That veto, in our view, is against the deep spirit of Article 27, paragraph 3, of the Charter of the United Nations, under which we all operate. And it is a cynical attempt to use a provision to advance military aims of one of the participants to the conflict.

The Secretary-General has come to us in this urgent meeting and said that we need to act, we need to do something to address the situation. We urge Russia, we urge Iran, we urge Syria to work with us. We can only focus on the immediate right now. But saving lives must be our focus of attention. We need to get the United Nations on the ground. We need to get the United Nations able to help people — those who want to leave be allowed to leave and those who need humanitarian assistance to get it when they can.

Of course we know that peace and stability will be restored ultimately only through a return to dialogue, reconciliation and meaningful political change. But those things seem very far away right now. Let us, right now, concentrate on what has to be done in the immediate hours.

Mr. Yelchenko (Ukraine): Ukraine is appalled by the reports of mass atrocities and manhunt campaigns launched by the Syrian regime and its partners in crime. Just listen to those Syrians trapped in Aleppo who cry out,

> "We are all praying for rain. When it rains the planes cannot fly and the bombardment stops for a short while."

Is that fake, according to the Russian Ambassador?. People seeking refuge are flooding into the area that is still outside of the regime's control. Thousands are cramming onto a piece of land of about six square kilometres. People arrive with three or four children in tow, fleeing the looming carnage.

The Syrian regime says that it has opened a corridor for the people towards so-called safety. But local civilians prefer to face bombs and harsh conditions rather than the welcoming hands of the Government. The fact that the Syrian army has already killed half a million of its own people is indeed a big deterrent. Things could not possibly look uglier. The worst part is that it is not as if no one had seen this coming, or could not have stopped it. It was crystal clear from the very beginning what the Syrian regime forces and militias would do to the residents of Aleppo once they captured the city. It was crystal clear from the very beginning that sectarian violence and slaughter would take place.

That is why in the past two months members of the Security Council twice attempted to avert such a course of events. But all of those efforts were shattered by the irresponsible position of one of the permanent members of the Council, namely, the Russian Federation. We find that the words of Jan Egeland go straight to the point:

> "Syrian and Russian Governments must be held responsible for the atrocities committed by militias loyal to President Bashar Al-Assad in Aleppo".

Is that fake too, simply because it has not been confirmed by the Russian military — who are of course the most trusted people in the world?

Besides the unimaginable suffering of the people fleeing the ongoing onslought in Aleppo, we also must keep in mind disturbing developments around Palmyra, where the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is again trying to reassert its presence. An ugly picture emerges. While opposition forces are being persistently and mercilessly pounded by the full military might assembled by Bashar Al-Assad, with the help of his allies, Da'esh meets close to no opposition on its way to retake Palmyra.

That raises the question: What are the real priorities of Damascus and its allies? When will the same amount of dedication go into fighting against ISIL's forces as is expended against the opposition forces? It is clear now that both the Syrian regime and Russia have chosen to resolve the Syrian conflict militarily. I cannot remember how many times my delegation has repeated that. Instead of a cessation of hostilities in Aleppo, Russia and the Syrian regime are using a Grozny-style scorched-earth policy. They have to face justice for their crimes, and for what will come afterwards in terms of the grave consequences of such brutality.

Words do not suffice to describe the magnitude of the crimes committed in Aleppo. History will be the judge. I am sure that the day will come when the Syrian regime and its accomplices will be sitting in a different chamber under different circumstances, facing a trial on all that they have done.

We call once again — I hope in a voice of unity — for imposing a sustainable ceasefire in Aleppo to allow the safe evacuation of the vulnerable and the wounded from the rubble of Aleppo. We underline yet again the obligation of all parties on the ground to protect civilians and abide by international humanitarian law and human rights law.

Mr. Bermúdez (Uruguay) (*spoke in Spanish*): We thank the Secretary-General for his briefing.

Unfortunately, despite the intensified rate of meetings in the Security Council, and more recently in the General Assembly, on the situation in Syria, we continue to see — week after week, day after day and even hour by hour — a macabre, seemingly endless spiral. The most recent United Nations reports on the situation in Aleppo are horrendous. First we learned of the possibility that hundreds of men, women and children in eastern Aleppo may have disappeared after being evacuated. And today we are being told that summary executions are taking place in that same part

of the city and that snipers are murdering dozens of civilians, including women and children, in the streets and even in their homes.

It all seems to show that we are facing the end of the battle for control of Aleppo. But the question must be asked: At what price? How many innocent civilians have paid with their lives in the fight against terrorism? How many corpses are under the rubble of the intense bombings? Perhaps we will never know. What we do know is that the vast majority of children, mothers, workers and the elderly who are dead were not terrorists. We have urged the parties to the conflict to refrain from continuing to commit these atrocities. Everything points to the fact that responsibility for the lastest episodes belongs to the Syrian forces and their allies. Let us be clear: Syria has been destroyed, and the crisis cannot be solved militarily. Negotiations among all the parties are the only way out. All the parties to the conflict should be held accountable for their crimes. Impunity will only encourage them to go on with such bestial acts.

Today's meeting focuses on Aleppo, but Uruguay is seriously concerned about the progress that terrorist groups have made in the past week, particularly in Palmyra, where Da'esh fighters have retaken control and dozens of civilians have been killed. The terrorists are still very strong in Syria. We reiterate that at the moment the only possible solution depends on the imposition of an unconditional and immediate ceasefire in Aleppo and throughout the rest of Syria, which will enable hundreds of thousands of Syrians to get immediate access to humanitarian aid and make it possible to hold negotiations, as provided for in resolution 2254 (2015), which is just about to mark its first anniversary. We must ensure that arrogance and triumphalism based on ephemeral military victories do not prevail. We must listen to the members and to the Special Envoy, and we must negotiate.

Mr. Martins (Angola): We would first like to thank the Secretary-General for his briefing, and to express our solidarity with his efforts to stop any atrocities being committed in the city of Aleppo against civilians, including women and children.

It is our collective responsibility to ensure that all parties to the conflict avoid targeting civilians and that they abide by international humanitarian law and human rights law. Aleppo, and especially its civilian population, has suffered enough. The Government and the opposition have a difficult task ahead of them that will require a great deal of dialogue and coordination if the civilians trapped between their forces are to be spared death and suffering. That is the only way that the carnage in Aleppo can be stopped and a move begun towards a political solution. We strongly urge the parties to choose the path of dialogue rather than that of violence, including the detention, torture and killing of combatants as well as civilians.

Mrs. Adnin (Malaysia): We would like to thank the Secretary-General for his briefing, which told us that the annihilation of eastern Aleppo is not merely a threat but a reality, carried out with complete disregard for innocent life.

Only last week the Council was informed that aerial attacks would be halted unilaterally and military operations on the ground in eastern Aleppo would pause to enable medical evacuations and the separation of armed opposition fighters from terrorist groups. But the brutal onslaught began again before any significant relief could be delivered. We are compelled to ask what the purpose or intention of the announced pause was.

We are deeply disturbed by United Nations reports of extrajudicial killings of civilians, including women and children, during the attacks on the ground, which reached 82 yesterday alone. What crime could those children possibly have committed to be summarily executed by pro-Government militias in their own homes? In addition to those who have been mercilessly executed, more than 100 children who were unaccompanied or separated from their families have been reported by UNICEF to be trapped in buildings in eastern Aleppo under heavy attack. The attacks must stop. The children must be saved and protected.

With eastern Aleppo on the brink of total destruction, those with leverage must use their influence on the parties to the conflict to end the summary execution of civilians there. More than 100,000 people are still trapped there, and we strongly support the United Nations request for the urgent imposition of a ceasefire in order to enable them to evacuate. The fate of the innocent civilians is the responsibility of the advancing forces.

In view of the Syrian Government forces' impending takeover of eastern Aleppo, we expect that the Government will take immediate steps to implement the following measures. First, it must demand that its forces exercise maximum restraint, respect the

principles of distinction and proportionality and refrain from any targeting or extrajudicial or summary executions, particularly of civilians and especially women and children. Secondly, it must facilitate immediate and unfettered access for humanitarian aid and personnel to all areas under its effective control, and engage in an inclusive political dialogue, with a focus on achieving national reconciliation. We believe that those are the minimum steps needed to restore calm and stability, which the Government itself has cited as one of its primary aims.

As the Secretary-General said, the legitimate aspirations and grievances of the parties opposed to Damascus must be addressed in a peaceful manner through constructive dialogue and engagement, and not by launching another phase of military operations.

Mr. Wu Haitao (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I would like to thank the Secretary-General for his briefing.

China remains deeply concerned about the situation in various parts of Syria, including Aleppo, and would like to express its profound sympathy for the Syrian people, who have suffered dire misery as a result of the conflict there.

The way that the situation in Syria has evolved so far is the result of the interplay of a host of factors operating in many dimensions. The international community should think deeply about the underlying causes of the situation and take concerted measures aimed at reaching a comprehensive, fair and appropriate solution. The complexity and sensitivity of the current circumstances make it even more important to ensure that the international community does not diverge from a path that can lead to our overarching goal, which is to seek a political settlement. We should work together to move the Syrian crisis back on to a path of dialogue and consultation, with a view to reaching a lasting solution to the war and chaos as soon as possible. Any efforts on the part of the international community should encourage efforts on all four of the relevant tracks — restoring the ceasefire, resuming the political talks, re-establishing joint counter-terrorism efforts and providing humanitarian aid. The role of the United Nations as the chief provider of good offices should be upheld, and the Geneva talks resumed without delay.

Fighting terrorism is part and parcel of a solution to the Syrian issue. The Islamic State terrorist organization has recently been launching repeated attacks, and the risk that terrorist forces may become more powerful and spread is growing. The international community should give priority to combating terrorist forces on Syrian soil, strengthening its coordination of counter-terrorism efforts, adhering to uniform standards and standing firm against the Islamic State and every other group designated as terrorist by the Security Council. China is ready to work with the international community to urge for a political solution to the Syrian crisis as soon as possible.

Mr. Bessho (Japan): Japan fully shares the international community's serious concerns about the worsening humanitarian situation in Aleppo and believes that it requires an urgent response. With the extremely cold and rainy weather, more than 80,000 internally displaced persons are reported to be in very dire circumstances. It is very important that the Council has convened today on this matter. We must take action to help civilian Syrians. The Secretary-General has made a very clear statement today; the United Nations underlines the obligation to protect civilians and abide by international humanitarian law and human rights law. That is especially the responsibility of the Syrian Government, and its allies, as it continues with its military action in Aleppo.

On 8 December, the Council shared its views on two things: humanity first, and that we must advance a political process based on resolution 2254 (2015). It was meaningful that the Council could at least share that view on Syria for the first time in a long time. The core message was that there is no military solution to the Syrian crisis. This long-lasting conflict has deeply scarred the Syrian people, physically and psychologically. And hatred provides grounds for extremism, benefiting no one.

Today the Council must think of the Syrian people above all. A prompt cessation of hostilities is needed, together with humanitarian aid and the advancement of the political process. We must demonstrate, not with words but with action, that the international community will not abandon the people of Syria even in this dark hour.

Mr. Moustafa (Egypt) (*spoke in Arabic*): We have held repeated meetings in the Security Council and the General Assembly regarding the Syrian crisis during the past few months to no avail, but rather generating draft resolutions and statements and engaging in endless arguments while the Syrian people continue to suffer at the hands of such an inhumane and bloody

conflict. That conflict persists, although we all see that it is possible to reach a solution, provided there are good intentions. Time is being wasted and lives are being lost in vain, despite a conclusive decision has been within the reach of parties both directly and indirectly involved in that merciless war, and despite the terms of reference of the Council being clear regarding putting an end to the bloodshed, especially through the implementation of resolutions 2254 (2015) and 2268 (2016).

There were moments when we believed that the contending parties would realize that the conflict was futile and that it was time to face the facts. But, time and again, we are confronted by the fact that the highly political and military positions continued to exceed the desire to achieve a settlement of the conflict and to ignore the worst humanitarian situation in modern history, overlooking the fact that Syrian territories had become a breeding ground for terrorists and mercenaries, and the fact that it was being torn apart by non-State actors, on the one hand, and foreign intervention, on the other. The existence of political rivalries continues to delay embarking upon serious negotiations among the Syrian parties. Divergent views on the history and an evaluation of the reasons behing the Syrian crisis and the factors fuelling it must not remain an obstacle for the international community. We now have before us a clear conflict, which is tantamount to a fully fledged war, and it will not cease without a political solution.

In that regard, allow me to reiterate the elements that we tried, during the past period, to reflect in Egypt's initiatives, whether through our communication with the parties to the crisis, including the Syrian opposition, or through our endeavours in the Security Council, which we hoped would guide all the parties with influence.

First, during the past six years, the Syrian people, including children, mothers, the elderly and men, have borne witness to something no human being should ever have to, namely, displacement, murder and the destruction of their future. Hence, taking into account the humanitarian condition of all Syrians, regardless of their affiliations, must remain the first priority for all parties withuot exception, irrespective of the goals. The achievement of democracy and liberty, on the one hand, and fighting terrorism, on the other, are not pretexts to tear apart a society, kill children or take vengeance on certain sects through executions.

Secondly, the proliferation of terrorism in Syria is not an illusion or an exaggeration, neither is it a subject that can taken lightly in terms of its importance and its impact on the events on the ground. Scores of thousands of terrorists, mercenaries and extremist ideas are proliferating with the support of outside forces. There are groups and parties that have consciously chosen to support extremism and terrorism politically and operationally on the ground, including through direct cooperation and political support to the Al-Nusra Front and Fatah Al-Sham. It is high time that the Security Council and its counter-terrorism bodies decisively confront that phenomenon, especially through the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1267 (1999), and the International Syria Support Group.

Thirdly, the proxy war and foreign intervention in Syria must cease. Syrians must regain their right to shape their future and achieve their aspiration for a united, stable and democratic country that observes human rights and equality among various attitudes and affiliations.

Fourthly, Syrian parties are still capable of regaining control. I call upon all of them to assume their responsibility vis-à-vis their people, who are being killed and displaced daily, free of foreign intervention or one party aspiring to gain control over the other. There will be no winners or losers in Syria. Everybody will lose.

Regardless of the level of the military solution on the ground for one party or another, such a solution will not be long-term and will not provide stability for the Syrian people. The challenges facing it are greater and more important than the battle results. Those challenges include millions of internally displaced people and refugees, hundreds of thousands of victims, entire cities destroyed, an economic collapse and the entrenchment of the long-term goals of foreign parties that do not intersect with the interests of the Syrian people. What is more grave than all of that is the fact that the sectarian and ethnic conflict over the past few years threatens any aspiration for coexistence.

I will therefore continue to repeat that the situation in Syria will not be resolved through a military solution. Facing such challenges requires a comprehensive and balanced political process. I once again call upon the Secretary-General, through his Special Envoy, to start as quickly as possible to prepare for negotiations

between the Government and the broadest spectrum of the opposition, without selectivity or accommodations that jeopardize the independence of the Syrian solution, and in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015) and on the basis of the Geneva communiqué (see S/2012/522, annex) in order to develop a transition on which the Syrian parties can agree. I also call upon the Secretary-General to resist any pressure that could hamper the conduct of negotiations as soon as possible. Furthermore, I call upon him to actually name any party that is indeed impeding such negotiations. It is high time for all parties to assume responsibility before the Syrian people and before history.

Mr. Ciss (Senegal) (*spoke in French*): I would like to join those who have taken the floor before me in thanking the Secretary-General for his informative briefing.

I would also like to reiterate the deep concern of my delegation in the light of the proliferation and intensification of military activity in eastern Aleppo, which has cost the lives of many victims, including numerous children, and has forced many people to flee. My delegation calls for light to be shed on the atrocities that have allegedly been committed, particularly the death of 82 persons, as reported today.

We reiterate our condemnation of the ongoing destruction of public infrastructure, such as markets, schools and the water supply system, but also of medical facilities, which is a flagrant violation of international humanitarian law, international human rights law and resolution 2286 (2016). That leads us to call once again for a cessation of hostilities, namely, compliance with the humanitarian pause, which would allow medical and humanitarian personnel to assist those in need in Aleppo. We also recall the responsibility incumbent upon the warring parties, especially the Government, in terms of respecting international humanitarian law and human rights law.

The humanitarian aspect of the crisis is symptomatic of the political crisis. We renew our calls to the members of the International Syria Support Group, particularly the co-Chairs, to redouble their efforts so as to breathe new life into the negotiation of a cessation of hostilities, which is crucial for humanitarian assistance to be provided and for the relaunching of the political process.

On its part, the Security Council must continue to play its role as the guarantor of international peace and security in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations. We must also live up to our responsibilities in the light of the ongoing deterioration of the situation on the ground. In that regard, our efforts must be focused on ending violence, and in particular on ensuring a resumption of the cessation of hostilities across Syria by implementing resolution 2268 (2016).

In addition to contributing to building pragmatic responses to the catastrophic humanitarian situation in the city of Aleppo, we believe that a global approach to the Syrian crisis is more necessary than ever, which involves in particular addressing political and security aspects as part of a broader discussion on terrorism, radicalization and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Mr. Suárez Moreno (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) (*spoke in Spanish*): The conflict affecting Syria goes far beyond its own borders and into the arena of public opinion, which is one of its most active battlegrounds, as we have seen in this Chamber. It has been emphatically stated that the humanitarian crisis in Syria is the greatest disaster of the twenty-first century. Some have asked where the moral compass is of those who defend the Syrian Government, and in that regard call for there to be no impunity for what is happening on the ground.

Unfortunately, the moral voices among us seem to ignore what their actions led to in Iraq and Libya before the conflict in Syria. We ask: What can the international community do so that those who are responsible for fuelling such conflicts are held accountable before justice, in order to ensure that the interventionist agendas that have caused such chaos, which merit condemnation, are not repeated?

Our country is alarmed by the humanitarian situation in Syria, as we have expressed on many occasions. The Syrian people are victims of an armed conflict that has been fuelled by foreign intervention and specific geopolitical agendas, which have violated the sovereignty of that country.

In that perverse dynamic, we should be conscious of the fact that terrorism is the principle cause of the conflict and its negative impacts. The Al-Nusra Front has positioned itself in the east of the city, which has caused true chaos, establishing links with the so-called moderate opposition. That alliance, instead of looking out for the security of civilians in eastern Aleppo, has prevented them from leaving the area, even through the

use of force, as has been stated by many of the displaced persons who have been able to leave the area.

If the 9 September agreement between the Russian Federation and the United States had been implemented, we would be facing a more encouraging scenario. The lack of willingness from the relevant players to distinguish the so-called moderate opposition from the threat of the Al-Nusra Front and its other allies is the real reason for the collapse of negotiations. That, together with the deliberate bombing by the global coalition against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) on locations held by Syrian forces, has ended up destroying all attempts to bring peace and stability to Syria.

Our country is convinced that Syria has the right to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity against attacks perpetrated by terrorist organizations. It is important to point out that the Government of Syria is making a very significant effort to counter the scourge of terrorism in its territory. The recovery of every area held by ISIS and Al-Qaida is a guarantee of peace and stability in the region. Examples of that are the cities that are under the control of the country's authorities.

We regret that humanitarian suffering is being used to advance the specific agendas of other countries, which in no way benefit the people of Syria. We reiterate that this humanitarian crisis, caused by more than five years of war and fuelled from abroad, must be analysed in a balanced manner. We insist that the humanitarian issue requires an approach that is balanced, objective and impartial.

Recently, we have noted that more than 10,000 civilians have fled from areas controlled by terrorists in search of housing, food and medicines, which they were deprived of by the Al-Nusra Front and its allies. We therefore believe that the United Nations should provide humanitarian assistance to those areas that have been liberated from the terrorists, so as to provide more support to the Syrian population. We also agree with the idea that both humanitarian groups and the International Syria Support Group, which is working on a cessation of hostilities, should continue their work, since the participation of a larger number of neighbouring countries, as well as the international community, in finding a solution for the Syrian people would be tremendously helpful.

In conclusion, we reiterate that a political and peaceful solution is the only possible option to achieve peace and stability in Syria. We therefore need to support the diplomatic efforts under way by the Special Envoy and his attempts to relaunch peace talks in Geneva.

The President: I shall now make a statement in my national capacity.

This particular Security Council will go down in history. Many questions will have to be answered. Did Aleppo have to fall in the way in which it has fallen? Why could we not prevent the massacres? Why were we not able to organize the evacuation of all the civilians from eastern Aleppo after months of siege? This is an emergency meeting of the Security Council, and as such my statement will be straightforward.

I entirely endorse the call made by the Secretary-General, and I call upon the Syrian Government and on those that have acknowledged an influence over the parties to the conflict to do all they can to facilitate an agreement providing for the urgent evacuation of civilians, the withdrawal of the few remaining fighters, urgent access for humanitarian aid, as well as the provision of medical assistance to the population.

Aleppo need not fall this way. It is not necessary that another sombre page of history be written today. Spain will continue to work closely with New Zealand and with Egypt to avoid this.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

The representative of the Russian Federation has asked for the floor to make a further statement.

Mr. Churkin (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): I would like to make a brief but important clarification in response to the President's appeal: maybe I was not correctly interpreted, or maybe I did not say clearly enough what I meant in my statement. The fact is that the agreement you referred to, that you called for — our removal of the fighters — was achieved a few hours ago, and it is being implemented. The fighters, together with families and the wounded, are leaving in the directions of their choosing, including towards Idlib.

Over the past hour we have received information that the military activities in eastern Aleppo have stopped. There is no question about the cessation of hostilities or humanitarian operations: the Syrian Government has established control over eastern Aleppo and now the time has come for practical humanitarian intitiatives.

The population that remains there should not need to leave, although some civilians may indeed wish to leave that destroyed city. But military actions have stopped.

This very difficult chapter relating to the situation in eastern Aleppo has now ended. Let us hope that this will indeed be a precondition for establishing the political efforts to relaunch negotiations, as Mr. De Mistura said recently. There should be large-scale humanitarian support to eastern Aleppo, to those people who left the city and those who remain there. Preconditions should be established so that those who left the city will be able to return to their homes as soon as possible.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now give the floor to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): There is a quote by the Russian author Tolstoy that applies to some people present in this Chamber: "When judging other people's shortcomings, remember your own." As to Plato, he had this beautiful quote too: "The bigger the lie, the easier it is to believe."

I understood from my American representative colleague that it was the Syrian Government that committed massacres and crimes of genocide against humanity on behalf of her country's successive Governments, in Viet Nam, Korea, Palestine, Iraq, Libya, Nicaragua, Rwanda, the Great Lakes region, Grenada, Cuba and Yugoslavia. Therefore, I start my statement by declaring my Government guiltless of these massacres. Perhaps we will publish a White Book to clarify our position on these accusations.

Certain members of the Security Council have, since the beginning of the terrorist war imposed on Syria, continually sponsored draft resolutions and called for emergency meetings, as is the case today, on the basis of fabricated information, false reports and false testimony. Such briefings are called every time the Syrian Army and its allies make headway against the armed terrorist groups that are supported by the very Governments of these States. These are terrorist groups and not civilians.

The situation remains the same today. The highest official of the Organization, the Secretary-General, who has only two and a half weeks left before the end of his mandate, rushed in to make a statement on the situation in the city of Aleppo on the basis of unverified information, as noted in his own statement: "The United Nations is unable to independently verify these reports." If the Secretary-General is unable to verify these reports, why then has he published them in an official statement in order to denigrate the Syrian Government and its allies in their fight against terrorism?

I think we have every right to also ask how the United Nations, which is supposedly a source of credible information, can publish statements and make judgments on the basis of dubious sources. It can do so only if the goal of some parties in the Organization is to serve the agendas of certain States by militating against the Syrian Government and its allies and providing political and media coverage to the terrorist groups working under their orders.

I would like to reiterate once again to the President, the Security Council members and those States that still uphold and respect international law, the Charter of the United Nations and the relevant Security Council resolutions on combating terrorism, that the actions of the Syrian Government and its allies in Aleppo and other Syrian cities are the expression of the constitutional and legal obligation of every Government to protect its citizens against terrorism. I deny categorically all fabricated reports used by the representatives of the United States, France and Britain, as well as their partners, to claim that the Syrian Government is targeting its citizens in Aleppo. I reiterate that all the actions of the Syrian Government since the start of operations in Aleppo, whether in opening safe crossing points — including for armed people — securing shelter centres, issuing amnesty decisions and providing all forms of medical assistance and food, have had the overarching goal of protecting civilians and saving their lives.

Allow me at this stage to show the Council some photos. This is what the Syrian army is doing in Aleppo. Here is a picture of a Syrian soldier turning his body into a bridge to help a woman get out of the car that took her out of eastern Aleppo. This is what the Syrian army does. Here is another soldier carrying on his shoulders a civilian woman who was trying to flee from eastern Aleppo, where the terrorists hold sway. Here are Syrian soldiers arranging the distribution of humanitarian assistance to civilians emerging from eastern Aleppo. I have many photos, but I know that time is short.

It is astounding that all of the reports of the Security Council have referred to the presence of tens of thousands of mercenary foreign terrorists in Syria

from more than 100 States, as I thank my colleague the Permanent Representative of Egypt for mentioning. However, some, in their effort to protect their terrorists, typically deny the Syrian Government's obligation to verify the identity of certain people accompanying civilians as they leave certain Aleppo neighbourhoods that had been controlled by terrorists, with a view to preventing them from sneaking into and resuming their terrorist acts in Syrian territories and maybe thereafter the territories of any country represented here. I have dozens of photos showing these terrorists who chopped off heads and ate human livers as they sought to flee eastern Aleppo alongside civilians, dressed as women. These heroes were wearing women's clothes to flee with civilians from eastern Aleppo, but they were arrested by the Syrian army.

It is the height of hypocrisy to pursue allegations against the Syrian Government based on the reports and testimony approved only by the representatives of those who convened this meeting and their intelligence services, while at the same time they turn a deaf ear and blind eye to accounts of our people in the city of Aleppo who were liberated by the Syrian army and its allies. Their testimony of their suffering at the hands of armed terrorist groups, led by foreign terrorist who do not speak Arabic, has been broadcast not only by Syrian but also by foreign news agencies. It is also the height of hypocrisy for the representatives of these States to insist, based on the same reports, that the Syrian Government is besieging its people and obstructing their access to food and medicine, whereas those same States continue to deny the fact that dozens of warehouses that were under the control of armed terrorist groups in Aleppo were full of all kinds of medical and food supplies prohibited to civilians.

Is it reasonable for any reasonable person to believe for a moment that dozens of thousands of terrorist fighting the Syrian army in Aleppo could for more than four years, maintain their terror — targeting civilians, the Syrian army and infrastructure — had not they been continuously supplied with various types of weapons and protection by the sponsors of terrorism, some of whom are from States inside the Council? That is the question.

I strongly and totally reject any fabricated lies, allegations and hallucinations put forward by certain Council members in their statements concerning acts of revenge, summary executions and terror against civilians. As to pursuing and targeting terrorists, that lies at the very heart of the constitutional prerogatives of the Syrian Government and of those Governments that have acted likewise in the streets of Nice, Paris, London, Boston, Oklahoma, North Carolina, Cairo, Sinai, Tunis, Bombay, Nigeria, Kenya and Tanzania.

Finally, I was surprised to hear my colleague, the British Ambassador, say that he does not believe that the Syrian Government is resisting terrorism in Aleppo. He is the same Permanent Representative who, alongside his colleagues, has participated in the adoption of 16 resolutions on Syria, 8 of them on counter-terrorism. All of those resolutions were adopted because of the Syrian crisis., and all of them provide for the right of the Syrian Government and the participation of other Member States to fight terrorism in Syria and Iraq. So how can he then deny the presence of terrorism in Syria while there are eight resolutions on counter-terrorism that his own country voted in favour of?

To conclude, if I may make a correction, the question has been raised to as whether we should have waited for the fall of Aleppo. Allow me to make a simple correction. Aleppo did not fall. It is a Syrian city that has been liberated from terrorism and its sponsors, who toyed with safety and security of its population. Aleppo has returned to the bosom of the State and the bosom of the homeland. It did not fall.

The meeting rose at 1.55 p.m.